

San Antonio Express News  
April 12, 2005

**Comment: U.S. Can Help Spread Global Stability Through CAFTA**

By Oliver Pastrano Garza

Since the administration of George H.W. Bush, successive presidents have made expanding free trade a priority in spreading freedom and prosperity abroad and maintaining U.S. competitiveness in a globalized world.

The first President Bush envisioned a free trade zone from Canada to Tierra del Fuego, Argentina. In 1994, President Bill Clinton implemented the North American Free Trade Agreement, which has brought economic growth and rising standards of living for the people of all three countries — the United States, Mexico and Canada.

President George W. Bush has signed free trade agreements with Australia, Morocco and Singapore and is pursuing several other multilateral and bilateral agreements.

Indeed, in the coming weeks, Bush will submit for approval to Congress the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement, or DR-CAFTA, the most recently negotiated pact. The agreement is strongly in the United States' national interest.

Not only do free trade agreements promote economic prosperity by allowing countries to market their goods and services and attract investment from abroad, but they also transform societies by encouraging good governance because few will invest in places where corruption is rampant and the rule of law is not respected.

Indeed, peaceful and stable neighbors are essential to our own security. In this hemisphere particularly, the president believes economic growth and stability are possible only if governments consciously extend economic opportunity to everyone, especially the very poor.

DR-CAFTA is a way for the United States to further support freedom, democracy and economic reform in our own neighborhood. There is a bonus: It will also benefit U.S. consumers, workers and farmers.

While these may be six small countries geographically, they represent big markets. In fact, the U.S. exports more than \$15 billion annually to the region, making it the United States' 13th-largest export market worldwide.

With DR-CAFTA, we will be able to build on that record. The American Farm Bureau Federation estimates DR-CAFTA could expand U.S. farm exports by \$1.5 billion a year. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce predicts U.S. sales to the region would expand by more than \$3 billion in the first year of DR-CAFTA.

Remember, more U.S. exports mean more jobs here at home.

Great care was afforded aspects of the agreement focusing on labor rights and the environment.

First, the agreement requires that countries effectively enforce their labor and environmental laws. An innovative dispute settlement system uses monetary fines, as well as potential loss of trade benefits, to promote enforcement.

Furthermore, we will help those countries build their capacity to enforce their laws. For example, as a first step, this year Congress appropriated \$20 million for "labor cooperation, capacity building on fundamental labor rights and the elimination of child labor and improvement in labor administration."

The agreement's environmental provisions are groundbreaking, including a first-ever citizen participation process designed to identify and correct trade-related environmental problems. Ten environmental nongovernmental organizations from the region have endorsed CAFTA.

It is important that the United States stands with those who stand for peace and freedom. We hope Congress will agree: The United States should reach out to countries struggling to do the right things that contribute to a more peaceful and stable global community.

DR-CAFTA makes sense for the United States and our neighbors in Central America and the Dominican Republic.

*Oliver Pastrano Garza, former U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua, was born in Poteet and lived his formative years in San Antonio. He is serving as the senior adviser and delegate to the U.S. Mission in Geneva, Switzerland, during the 61st session of the Human Rights Commission.*